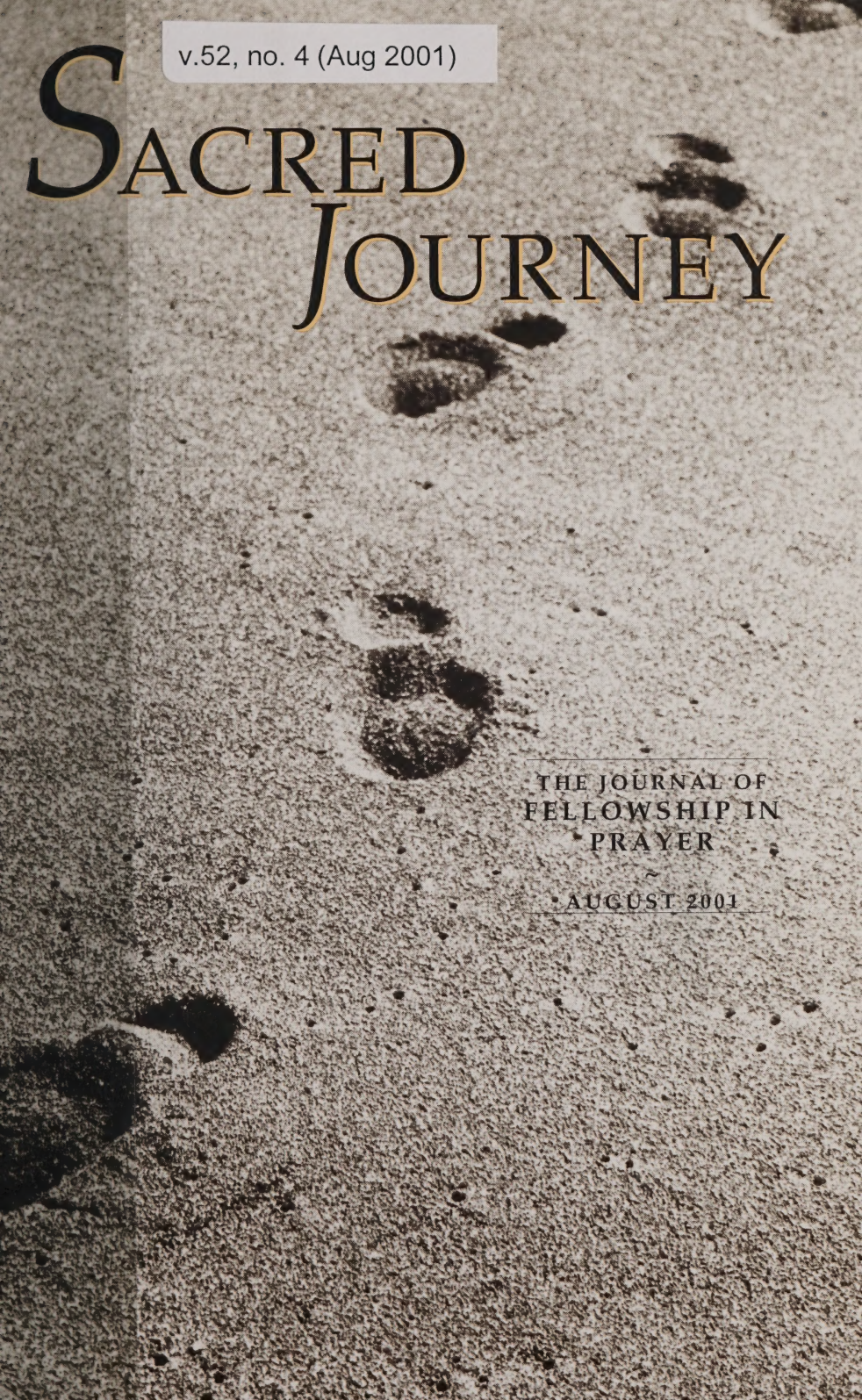
v.52, no. 4 (Aug 2001)

SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

~

AUGUST 2001

SACRED JOURNEY®

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

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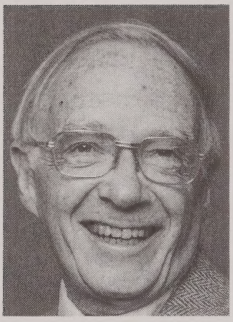
Cover photo by Robert F. Campbell.

One of You is the Messiah



More good news! In the previous issue I reported to you that Dr. Gerald May, the highly respected author, psychotherapist, and spiritual director would give one of the keynote addresses at our upcoming "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference in Princeton, in mid-June of 2002.

Now I can tell you that Joan Borysenko, the bestselling author of *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* and *A Woman's Journey to God*, will also give a keynote address. Dr. Borysenko, a leading authority on women's spirituality, has been described as an unabashed mystic who delights in stories such as the following from her book *7 Paths to God:*

> Once upon a time there was a failing monastery. No new postulants had entered for years, and the remaining monks were a crabby lot, always complaining about one another. The abbot was concerned that the monastery would close, so he prayed to God for guidance. One day he got the idea to visit his old friend the rabbi, and poured out his feelings about the troubled monastery and despondent monks. The two then sat companionably, sipping tea, while the rabbi regarded his friend with a puzzled look.

"But don't you realize that one of you is the Messiah?"

The abbot's eyes grew round. "What, one of us, the Messiah? We are plain and simple men. How could that possibly be?"

"Trust me, dear friend. God works in mysterious ways," smiled the rabbi.

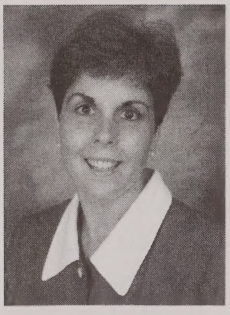
All the way back to the monastery, the abbot turned over the thought in his mind. One of them, the Messiah? Who on earth could it possibly be? Surely not Brother Paul, the slovenly cook. But why not? Doesn't God delight in nourishing his children? Absolutely not Brother Raymond, that silly joker, always acting the fool. But didn't Jesus say that we must become again like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? What about Brother Michael the gardener, so silent and taciturn? But maybe he isn't taciturn after all, just caught up in an inner communion. Doesn't he commune with the flowers and animals like St. Francis, the very patron saint of their order?

The abbot called all the monks together and announced that he had shocking news. One of them was the Messiah. The news jolted everyone and they began to regard each other with new respect. Every word and action was interpreted as a gift from God. An abundance of love poured from the monks, through their hearts and eyes, and nourished everything they looked upon. The gardens grew more beautiful and the food more delicious. People began to show up again for Sunday Mass. And soon, young men began to apply for admission to the order.

I look forward to hearing Dr. Borysenko at our second "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference in Princeton in mid-June of next year, 2002—and I hope to see you there!

REBECCA LAIRD/EDITOR

Flying



I call my husband and one of my daughters 'night flyers.' Both tell stories at the breakfast table of solitary soaring in their dreams. I find their fanciful flying interesting, but if I travel in my dreams, I am usually earthbound and in the company of others. Once in a dream I walked on hard ground following after a divine woman dresssed in flowing white as she led me into South Africa, which was then warring violently against itself. One summer night, I backstroked with a childhood friend through some resistant grainy sludge to Dharmsala in search of an illusive, faceless teacher. The realm of dreams, like the life of the spirit, often puzzles me when awake. But rather than musing on the mysteries, I often chide myself back into the practical world of reason and matter. But in all honesty, who among us wouldn't want to fly?

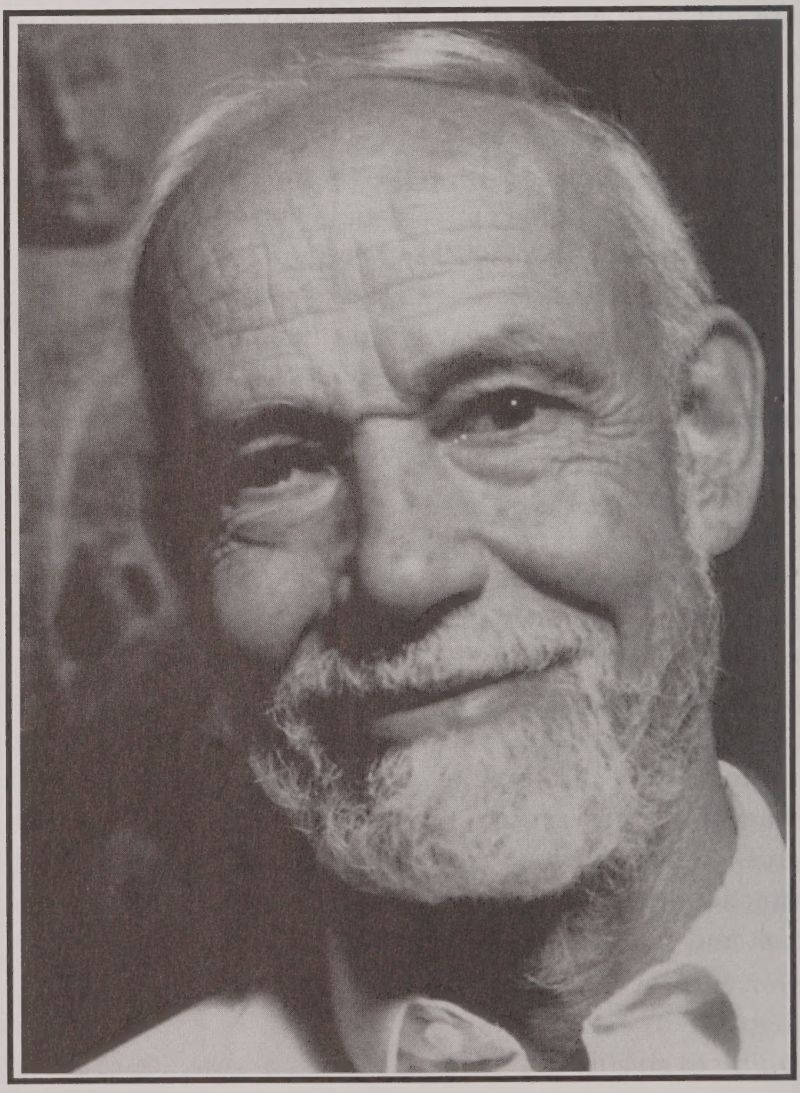
Author and psychiatrist Gerald May asks, "Think of the great spiritual leaders of history, and think of the most loving people you have known; were they well adjusted? Were their hearts determined by what was practical and proper? To state the point positively, what is so wrong with wanting to fly?" Dr. May implores us to "recover some of our own impossible hopes." He calls us to plumb

the depths of our experiences of love, and then we'll begin to see "glimpses of the way life yearns to be lived." You will find more wisdom from Gerald May in this month's *Illuminations*.

Our lead article features premier scholar of world religions, Huston Smith, who tells us that "there is a wholeness and connectedness to the universe which we are not fully aware of in the ordinary consciousness of our everyday lives." In *Companions on the Sacred Journey*, a recurring feature that will introduce the spiritual leaders slated to participate in our next conference in 2002, Zen roshi and Catholic priest, Robert Kennedy, describes how we can benefit from compassionate listening to the truths of other faiths. Chaplain Jean Semrau recounts a spiritual visitation in *A Transforming Experience* that assured her that "there is life beyond the body's death." In "Holy Ground," Elizabeth Bartlett tells of a time when her "soles" cried out for connection with the divine presence that "is not high above but beneath" her feet. Esther Quinlan, a convert to the Sufi path describes how ritual prayer reordered her life in "Sailing Home." In a *Pilgrimage* feature, Dennis Slattery seeks solitude and silence in several monasteries over a three month period but then must find a way to bring the stillness into his ordinary work life.

So what are your "impossible hopes"? How do you yearn for your life to be lived? And what's so wrong with wanting to fly? Before the summer recedes, stretch your spiritual wings. Take a barefooted walk on holy ground. Remember and retell a spiritual experience. Stick with your prayer practice when it yields nothing. Someday soon, I expect, you and I both may awaken and discover we are flying.

Huston Smith



Courtesy of HarperCollins

Huston Smith on the Universal Truths in the World's Religions

Nancy DePoe & Michael Christensen

Michael Christensen and Nancy DePoe of Drew University joined internationally recognized scholar of world religions, Huston Smith, at Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center in March, 2001 for a weekend devoted to "Applied Wisdom: Universal Truths in the World's Religions." Michael and Nancy agreed to take on dual roles as participants and observers and listen for take-home truths that could be shared with you.

"Listen, listen to the sound of the bell.
It calls me back to my own true self."
~Thich Nhat Hanh

Sixty retreat participants gathered at Kirkridge, a retreat center that sits on the Appalachian Trail in Eastern Pennsylvania, and agreed to adopt a Buddhist centering method practiced by Thich Nhat Hanh. One among us would ring the meditation bell every half hour during the three-day retreat to call the speaker and the participants to return to ourselves, initiating a silent pause in the activity of speaking, listening, thinking, note taking, and discussion. Every time the bell was sounded, a contemplative hush fell upon the group, and we became aware of the presence of the Sacred. After one such ringing of the bell early on

Saturday morning, Huston Smith, whose most recent books *Forgotten Truth* and *Why Religion Matters* explore the function and practice of religion throughout the world, paused and then said that events that seem unconnected and chance encounters actually are woven together on a deeper level; that there is a wholeness and connectedness to the universe of which we are not fully aware in the ordinary consciousness of our everyday lives.

Carl Jung called the interrelationship "synchronicity" and proposed that "the deeper we get in touch with the Self the more synchronicity will appear in our lives." Huston gave it a more religious cast. He called synchronicity, "God working in disguise." Huston then gave a personal and timely example. That morning at breakfast he happened to sit down at the "right" table. It turned out to be the right table because one of the participants had brought a favorite book to share. As it turned out, the book contained just the information that Huston needed for an upcoming lecture at Cambridge! In being where he was meant to be, the insight he needed was provided. After expressing his gratitude for the insight, and complementing the group on their high energy level at such an early morning hour, Huston proceeded with his agenda for the session: the three virtues, the three poisons and three forgotten truths.

THREE VIRTUES

"When we meet a stranger what [bit of] information would tell us the most about the person?" Huston asked. How old they are? Where they live? What kind of job they have? His answer: if we know what virtues inform a person's life, they tell us the most about that person. The three universal virtues found in all the ancient wisdom traditions are humility, charity, and veracity. "Humility is not groveling," Huston told the group, but rather respectful, holistic

and inclusive self-regard. "You must think of yourself as one and fully one." Respect yourself, but not more so than others, and once you can do this, then you can move on into charity.

"We think of charity too often in terms of putting quarters in the cups of the homeless and contributing to the forty or so causes that we contribute to." It is all a part of charity, but that isn't all. We must look upon our neighbors also as "fully one." If we did that, we would, as the Bible says, "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who mourn." Although Huston recognizes that humanly it is impossible to be "fully, one-hundred percent charitable," because we cannot physically experience another's pain, this shouldn't keep us from moving on toward the goal of compassion, which allows us to suffer with another.

The third virtue is veracity which means "the ability to see things as they really are." Huston illustrated what he meant by describing how light bends around an object in space. Just as light bends around objects, our vision bends around our "massive egos." "We think we are seeing things the way they are, but in fact, we are seeing things filtered by our prejudices, both positive and negative." Veracity is simply this: "a rising to the level of the sublime objectivity where we can see everything in the world undistorted by our preferences and prejudices, to simply see them exactly as they are." Not everyone present believed such clarity of vision was humanly possible, but all delighted in Huston's philosophical idealism.

THREE POISONS

The bell sounded again and Huston explained how the three virtues correspond to three poisons.

Western religions, such as Christianity, tend to cultivate the virtues by finding and nurturing them within. While the virtues are important and noble aspirations in Asian religions,

the Asian approach taken to the virtues is "by way of the backdoor." Virtues are thought of as somehow "outside of ourselves" while the poisons are "inside ourselves" and thus become the primary focus for spiritual growth.

"Buddhists say that there are three poisons within each one of us: greed, hate, and delusion." We have them all to varying degrees but one, Huston says, "is our long suit"—the one that we need to work on more than the others. He asked for a show of hands of the participants to find out what poison was the choice of the group that morning. All three poisons were well-represented. Huston even alluded to his own, with an example of how he greedily overfills his cup of morning coffee.

Once we identify our poison, he said, "Incrementally, drop by drop, the more we can drain our lives of greed, hatred, and delusion, the more the three virtues will automatically flow into our lives." As the poison is drained, the virtues seep in. Huston clarified, "The three poisons match up exactly with the three virtues: greed is the opposite of humility, hatred the opposite of charity, and delusion the opposite of veracity."

THREE FORGOTTEN TRUTHS

Later in the day Huston moved on from the personal aspects of truth to approach universal truth found in the world religions. He began, not from religion but from the perspective of the New Physics, particularly the current search for a unified field theory to explain the nature of the universe. "What does science say about the spiritual aspect of the universe?" he asked.

The deeper scientists penetrate into nature, he explained, the more complex yet unified they find nature's laws to be. Space, time, and matter used to be studied as separate domains

of knowledge. "Now we know that each dimension implies the other. They lock together like a jigsaw puzzle. And the deeper we go, the more we see that all things are connected."

"Singularity lies at the heart of reality," Huston asserted. "And it will surface in all parts of reality, including the physical universe discovered by science." Recent insights from theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking's search for a way to integrate the laws of gravity, quantum mechanics, and the theory of relativity led Huston to state the first universal but "forgotten" truth in the world religions this way:

Truth #1: *The Universe is more whole and integrated than our ordinary experience would seem to indicate.*

On the surface of things, Huston explained, life doesn't make much sense. Our ordinary lives are so disjointed. People suffer. There is egregious evil and tragedy beyond comprehension. He gave an example from his own family life and recognized that tragedies and suffering have touched the life of every person. On a lighter note, he joked with a huge grin on his face about "a new jigsaw puzzle to give your grandkids: one where no two pieces fit together. That will teach them how life is!"

In the face of apparent absurdity, the religions of the world agree that there is a veil that separates the appearance of things and the way things actually are in the depth of reality. Huston explained that the chaos in this world appears as the underside of a fine tapestry. "Tapestries on the backside look like there is no pattern. But the great traditions want to lift the veil for us by taking us by the hand to the other side of the tapestry to behold the beauty and pattern, the rhyme and the reason."

"Appearances not withstanding," he summarized, "reality is unified." And then he asserted a second universal but forgotten truth:

Truth #2: *Not only is reality—the sum and source of all that is—more integrated than we realize, but it is better than we realize.*

How much better is reality than what we are lead by our experiences to believe? "Infinitely!" he asserted with a clap of his hands. "And now I am going to tell you something that you're not going to believe." Huston paused dramatically, as everyone visibly leaned in closer to hear what the great teacher would say next. "God is the perfect being, infinitely more perfect than you can imagine. Light travels 186,000 miles per second. Our ever-expanding universe is now some 15 billion light years in diameter. We cannot imagine this. And we cannot come within a light year of imagining how perfect a being God is. All we can say is that God is infinitely more than the five billion light years of the universe." At that moment the bell rang and a moment of silence allowed those present to consider this vastness, before he identified the third forgotten truth:

Truth #3: *Reality is more mysterious than we usually suspect.*

"Mysterious" is a proper word to point to ultimate reality. "However, the word has been stripped of its pristine meaning," Huston bemoaned. "The murder mystery genre has robbed religion of its term. A murder mystery is a problem of 'who done it' that is solved at the end of the book. But a 'mystery' proper is not a problem. We seek to understand the mystery more with every step we take as we come closer to the goal."

"There are two unknowns [in religion and spirituality]: the unknown we know we do not know; and the unknown we don't know we don't know until we advance and find out what more we don't know. . . ." Huston helped us picture this truth, "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of mystery."

THREE CHORDS

Amid the sounds of participants talking and laughing together over lunch, Michael and Nancy found themselves fortuitously seated at the same table with Huston. Another moment of synchronicity? Earlier that morning during one of the sessions, Michael had become fascinated with Huston's brief discussion of rhythmic Tibetan chanting as a symbolic way of getting in touch with the mystery and harmony of the universe, and was eager to learn more. During a brief lull in the conversation, Huston turned to Michael and said, "You seem like someone with a question to ask." Not needing to be asked twice, Michael quickly complied, "When and how did you discover this unusual type of chanting?"

For a moment Huston didn't reply. Then, suddenly, a smile broke across Huston's face, and a noticeable sparkle appeared in his eyes. "Well," he said with great excitement as he leaned forward to tell his remarkable tale, as if he had made this discovery only yesterday, "I spent my sabbatical autumn of 1964 among the Tibetan lamas exiled in Northern India. I had limited time and opportunity, and had to choose one from among five accessible refugee monasteries. As if by chance, but actually it was another example of synchronicity, I chose the Gyutu Monastery on the outskirts of the Punjab hill station, one of only two monasteries in the world that continue to practice this ancient form of chant."

With the mastery of a great storyteller, Huston knew just where to pause in the retelling of his tale.

"And this," he said, "was the phenomenon I discovered:

> I happened to arrive on the eve of the most holy day of the year. I settled in and went to sleep early because the community would arise at 3 A.M. for meditation. I rose early too, accompanied the monks to a tent, which served as a temporary temple, and sat on the ground listening to the familiar Buddhist chanting. Being somewhat tired from my long journey the day before, I dozed off for a bit, but immediately became awake and alert when I heard from one lone cantor something utterly unfamiliar: three notes of full-chorded harmony from a single larynx! I was completely amazed and sat spellbound listening to the deep rhythmic chords. After the session, I ran to find my tape recorder. I returned and asked the monk to please do it again.

"That's how young, brazen and greedy a scholar I was in those days!" Huston said laughingly.

Michael, still trying to imagine the sound, asked, "How is it possible for someone to sing or chant three notes at the same time in harmony?" Huston continued, "They train to do this. Somehow they have shaped their vocal cavities to reinforce or resonate certain overtones. I think that somewhere between the bridge of the nose and the lower throat, the muscles have been adapted to make this sound, so that a perfect pitch vowel causes overtones, and these overtones are amplified into a three-tone major chord composed of a musical first, third, and faintly audible fifth."

Michael was beginning to understand the mechanics but wondered, "What does it all mean?"

"It is a physical manifestation of what we have been talking about in this morning's session," replied Huston. "Rhythmic chants capitalize on the power of overtones to awaken numinous feelings [of awe]. Sensed without being explicitly heard, overtones [the third and fifth notes of the tonic chord] stand in exactly the same relation to our hearing as the sacred stands to our ordinary mundane existence. Since the object of worship is to shift the sacred from peripheral to focal awareness, the vocal capacity to elevate overtones from subliminal to focal awareness carries symbolic power. For the object of the spiritual quest is to experience life as replete with overtones that tell of a 'more' that can be sensed but not seen, sensed but not said, heard but not explicitly. Reality is energy, energy is waved, waved energy is sound. It follows that reality is sound, and the question for us becomes, which wavelengths are our lives vibrating on and therefore sounding? In these chants, the lamas are modulating their lives to the wavelengths of the gods, tapping into that power and transmuting that power to others."

For a short span of hours, three virtues, three poisons, and three universal truths came together like the three chords of a Tibetan chant. The unseen pattern of the universe that cannot be explicitly described in words, rang in the silence that followed the ringing of a bell, flashed and sparkled in the brilliance of Huston Smith's fabled smile, and captured all of us who knew with surety that we had been where we were meant to be and, consequently, the insight we needed was provided.

Note: Huston Smith 's newest book *Why Religion Matters* is available at bookstores and online. Cassette tape recordings of the three-note-harmony single-voice chant are available for purchase. Proceeds are tax-deductible for Tibetan relief. Write *Sacred Journey* for details. Additional information supplied from "Can One Voice Sing a Chord?" by Huston Smith, Boston *Sunday Globe*, January 26, 1969.

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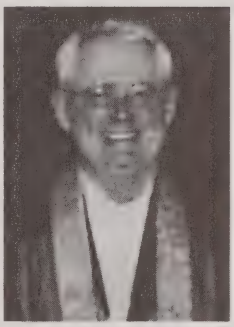
Zen Gifts to Christians

Robert E. Kennedy



Upon my installation as a Zen teacher, after fifteen years of practicing Zen both in Japan and the USA, I set out to teach Zen in my own Catholic community. I was already working as a professor of theology at Saint Peter's College, as a psychotherapist in private practice, and as a priest in neighboring parishes. Almost immediately this Catholic community from neighboring parishes expanded to include ex-Catholics who were no longer interested in further dialogue with the church but who still wanted to attain a greater spiritual depth, which they looked for in Zen. Then came Protestants who were interested in Zen Christian dialogue but not in Zen

Robert Kennedy, S.J., will lead a workshop on Zen and Christianity at the "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference sponsored by Fellowship in Prayer to be held June 14-16, 2002. Robert Kennedy is chairperson of the theology department of Saint Peter's College in Jersey City, NJ where he teaches theology and the Japanese language. This excerpt is from Zen Gifts to Christians, *©2000 by Robert E. Kennedy, p 2-4. Published by The Continuum International Publishing Group. Used by permission.*

Catholic dialogue. Following these came the Jews who were interested primarily in Zen Jewish compatibility and *zazen* (sitting meditation). When shortly thereafter Zen Buddhist students came to my sitting group, I encouraged them to focus their attention on koans to understand the truths of their own tradition and become better Zen Buddhists. This was the least I could do to repay my debt to my Zen teachers who labored to make me a better Christian. The diverse interests of the groups inspired me to concentrate on the various aspects of Zen that I believed would contribute to each one's individual development. What the varied groups did for me personally was to broaden and deepen my understanding of interfaith dialogue. Their diversity also enabled and continues to enable me to reach out to people of divergent faith backgrounds who choose to practice Zen to enhance their own devotional orientation.

As our sitting became more and more diversified, we did encounter difficulties having to do with traditions and customs and attempts to transplant Japanese customs to American soil. However, because of our ability to dialogue and resolve our conflicts and difficulties, we strengthened our commitment to search for truth together and to continue our fruitful interfaith dialogue. . . .

The extraordinary benefits I have received from practicing and conducting Zen retreats with my diversified groups of students have made me realize that sitting together is a balancing act that bonds us together. It sustains us in our effort to develop our own faith while it allows us to be transformed by the truths of other faiths. I have come to understand what matters most is that we listen to one another, not as adversaries but as compassionate people bringing gifts to one another to help

us each discover our still unrecognized possibilities. Surely we do not accept gifts from another religion uncritically but we must accept and reverence gifts from one another, molding and integrating them with our own history, tradition, and culture. We must not reject these gifts before we have received, experienced, and understood them in the light of the spirit and culture of the giver.

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Telling the Experience

Jean Semrau

A few years after my father's death, I spent a summer weekend on a farm in Maine. One evening, feeling restless, I went outside for a walk along the dirt lanes. As daylight faded, I listened to the sounds of birds settling for the night, horses neighing, insects chirping, and then, as I stood looking out at the darkening landscape, I heard the sound of breathing, just behind me. It was a distinctive breathing pattern, such as my father had had shortly before he died.

I stood very still, listening and wondering. My hands were clasped behind my back. Then I felt that a hand was very gently taking hold of my hands. Although my mind was racing, wondering what was happening, I also felt comforted and safe.

The animal sounds had dissipated into silence; I could only hear the soft breathing behind me. Then, from the farmhouse some distance away I heard voices, singing my father's favorite song, "Home on the Range." That song pushed me over some edge of caution or fear, and I

Jean Semrau, a chaplain at Rogue Valley Medical Center in Medford, Oregon, is a Quaker and a seeker of the divine within each person, animal, plant, and event.

remember saying, as I turned toward the breathing and the gentle hand, "Daddy, I miss you, and I love you." And then I heard a clear, calm voice say, with great love, "It's all right. I will take care of you."

This happened nearly thirty years ago, yet it continues to bring me comfort today. The experience, which I have since learned to call a spiritual experience, helped heal much of my grief. It let me know that I had not "lost" my father; that my relationship with him would continue. Since that night I have never doubted that there is life beyond the body's death.

Over the years, as I have facilitated support groups for people who are grieving, I have told that story. In every group there have been people who have had similar experiences of hearing, seeing, or sometimes smelling, a loved one who has died. Others have had dreams about their loved one; dreams which seemed more vivid and real to them than their usual dreaming. In every case, the person telling the story has felt comforted and reassured by the experience. Some have felt doubts about their perception. Some have wondered if they're going crazy; some discount the experience and tell themselves it didn't happen. Yet not one has felt frightened by the experience. And many have found that, because of the experience, much of their grief has been healed. Many have found that telling the story of the experience is also very healing.

There are, of course, many kinds of spiritual experiences. Some are experienced as complete silence. Some, as light. Some, as bliss, or peace. Some, as insight. Some people hear trees or flowers or animals speak to them. Some hear the voice of a guide or an angel. Some hear the voice of the divine. Some see visions, some dream dreams. Some hear the sound of one hand clapping. Some

mystically-gifted people hear the music of the spheres.

There are also deathbed spiritual experiences, known as near-death experiences (NDE's). During my years as a hospice chaplain, I was privileged to be with people as they died. Many of them were able to describe what they saw or heard (though they all said they didn't have adequate words): beautiful music; exquisite light; a lovely deep blue; a white staircase; a person dressed in white, radiating light and love; their mother; their father; their baby who died forty years before.

I encourage you who read this article to speak about spiritual experiences you have had. I hope you will invite others to speak of theirs. According to hospice physician Pamela Kircher,[1] almost everyone has some such experience during their lifetime, yet very few people talk or write about them. Healing, I believe, comes not only through the spiritual experience itself, but also through telling and re-telling the story. We need to share the wealth.

[1]*Pamela M. Kircher, M.D.*, Love is the Link: A Hospice Doctor Shares Her Experience of Near-Death and Dying, *(Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1995).*

PRAYERS

Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*

Listen to the exhortation of the dawn.
Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of our existence.
The glory of action, the bliss of growth, the splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow only a vision.
But today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day. Such is the salutation of the dawn.

~Kalidasa, Indian Dramatist

Huston Smith, author of *The World's Religions*

The choice is always ours. Then, let me choose
The longest art, the hard Promethean way
Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan
That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,
Kindled or quenched, creates
The noble or the ignoble men we are,
The worlds we live in and the very fates,
Our bright or muddy star.

~Aldous Huxley, from Orion

Excerpted from Public Lives, Private Prayers *by Mary Reath. Copyright © 2001 by Mary Reath. Used with permission of the publisher: Sorin Books, PO Box 1006, Notre Dame, IN 46656, www.sorinbooks.com. Mary Reath wrote to roughly 1000 people who live in the public eye and asked them to supply a prayer, poem, or statement about the life of the spirit.*

Rabbi Alexander M. Schlindler, Union of American Hebrew Congregations

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
And then, perhaps, to wisdom;
From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness–
And often back again;
From health to sickness
And back, we pray, to health again;
From offense to forgiveness
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding–
From fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat–
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
A sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage–
To life everlasting.

~Rabbi Alvin I. Fine, Gates of Repentance

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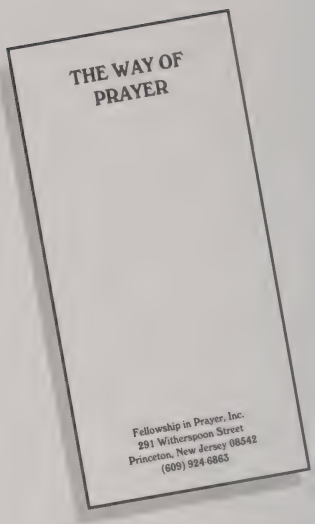

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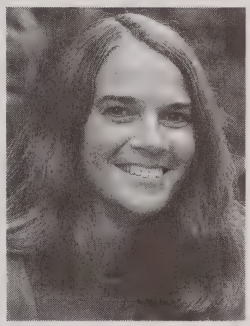
Holy Ground

Elizabeth Bartlett



One summer I attended a conference in a southwestern city, one suffering from urban sprawl and development. The part of the city in which I was staying knew nothing of ground—that is, soil. The surface under every step I took was either paved, concreted, carpeted, or tiled. Nowhere did I touch earth. Even our summer solstice ritual, during which many of us removed our shoes to find some type of physical grounding with the earth, was performed on concrete. More than anything during my brief visit, I found myself craving ground. I needed the soles of my feet on the earth. The soles of my feet—or is it the souls of my feet—craved connecting, reconnecting, sole to soul. Upon arriving home to the northern forest, I headed almost immediately into the woods. Finally, here, I was grounded again. I need to feel the soul of the earth meeting mine. Soil–sole–soul—all in connection. The soil responds to the sole, to the soul. There is a way in which the earth

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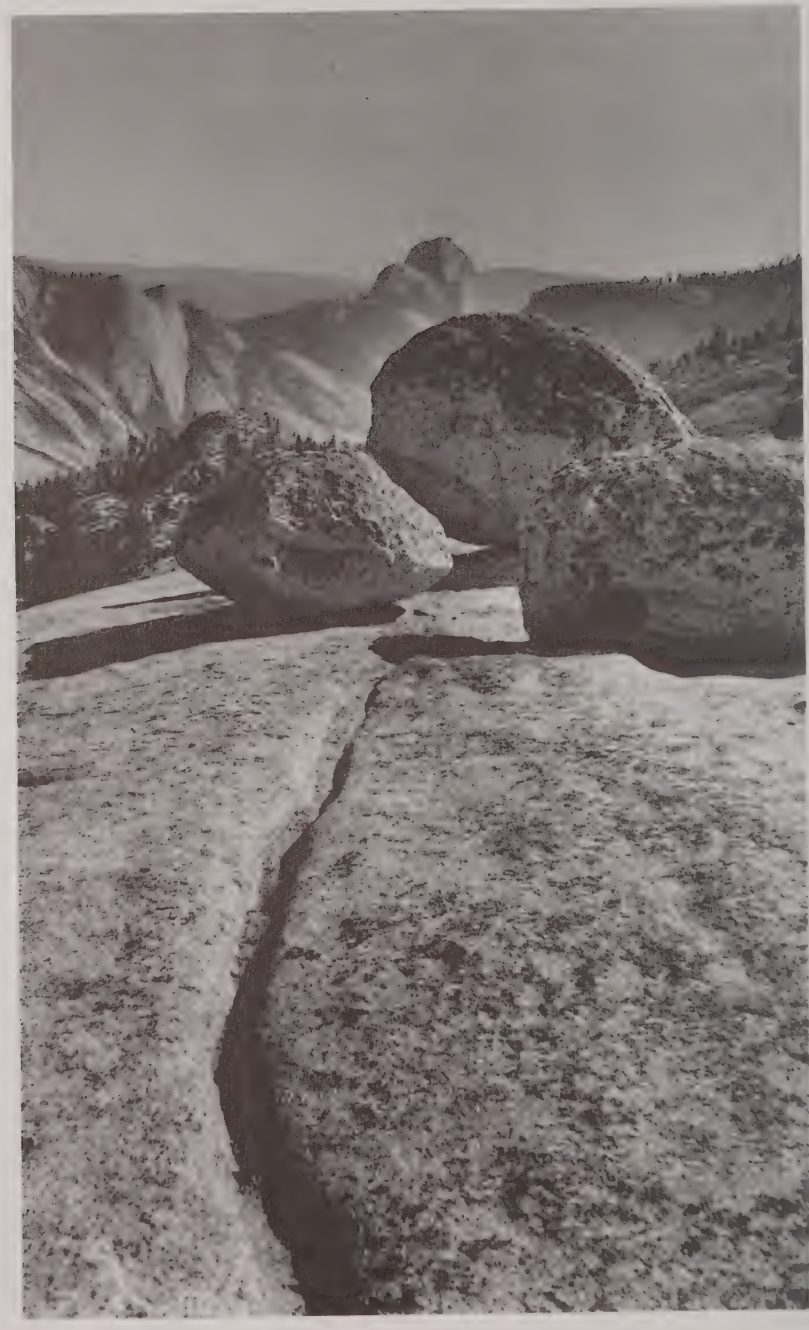

Robert F. Campbell

gives with each step, and I experience this in a physical and metaphysical way.

What is this unique energy found in connection with the ground? When I was learning *tai chi,* my instructor always held classes outside. She wanted us to feel grounded, that is, to feel the *chi* come through the soles of our feet, up our spines, and throughout our bodies. Grounded, we connected with the vital life force of the universe.

A friend once asked me what I do for my spiritual practice. I reflected on the many practices that I have tried, some of which have endured, others not—meditation, centering prayer, church services and common worship, yoga, *tai chi,* chakra meditation—but the most consistent and persistent has been my daily walk in the woods. I walk my prayers. Often as I walk through the woods, the Biblical verse that accompanies me is, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God." Walk humbly with thy God. The *humus* offers gifts of humility. To me that means to put aside my own ego and agenda and listen to the voice of the divine. In this connection of sole with soil my soul finds its center and its ground—its connection with the divine.

Different types of terrain each offer their unique experience. Shifting sands bring focus and attention. Hardpacked sands, especially barefoot at the water's edge, energize. The pine-needled forest bed calms and quiets. The springy response of the cedar swamp buoys up one's spirits. Well-used footpaths offer familiarity and a collective connection. Rugged hiking trails challenge us to find our strength and our balance. Grassy meadows bring frolic and joy. Of all, my favorite perhaps is rock, which is hard, solid, and yet so different from pavement or concrete. It holds and gives forth an energy stored

through millions of years. I happen to live in a place with some of the oldest rocks in the world, and when I walk upon them I can feel an ancient wisdom and the collective spirits of the many beings who have been here before me. I am fortunate to live where my feet can regularly touch the earth, and my own experience of being deprived of that connection renews my conviction that providing green spaces in the midst of urban settings is vital for the spiritual well-being of urban dwellers. I suppose those who live in concrete jungles find other sources of divine connection, but I need to touch the earth. I find that every day as I connect with the earth I am calmer, clearer. It is where I find my center and my inspiration.

Several months after I returned from that southwestern city, I injured my knee in a skiing accident, and ironically lost my ability to walk, except with a crutch on the smooth and even surfaces of linoleum, carpet, and concrete. Deprived of my daily walks in the woods, I felt off-center, disconnected, and spiritually bereft. I went searching for places I could walk out in the natural world. Yet, even though I could walk the boardwalk by the lake or a bikepath through the woods, I couldn't get grounded. Reflecting on the question, "What does the Lord require of you," I was struck in a new way by the requirement to walk humbly. I wrote in my journal, "I have been walking pridefully. I have been speaking more than listening. I say that my way of prayer has been taken from me, but perhaps I needed to learn again the nature of prayer. My walks in the woods lately have been filled with list-making and agenda-setting. I have not been listening, connecting. I have been basking in my own self-importance and taking on too much. What is the lesson here? To walk humbly with my God."

I needed to learn new ways to walk, to pray, to listen. Yet I still find a unique gift in being able to connect with the ground. On that wonderful day many months later when I could once again venture into the woods, and onto the earth itself, the mantra that accompanied me on my walk was, "my soul can breathe again."

Our cultural image of God situates the divine high above us, beyond even that much of sky we can see. Yet, where I most feel that divine presence is not high above, but rather beneath my feet. That connection with the earth brings forth the abundant presence of the divine all around me. This earth, this soil, this dirt is holy ground.

Robert F. Campbell

ILLUMINATIONS

Grace is love happening, love in action, and I have seen so much grace in the midst of so much brokenness in myself and others that I know we are all in love. We are in love, within love, as fish are in the sea and clouds are in the sky. It surrounds us, penetrates and perfuses us. In a very real sense, we are made of love.

We seldom realize our preciousness. We are so busy, so occupied with many little things, that we are blind to the one great thing. Only in the pauses between things, in the brief contemplative spaces of just being, can we catch a glimpse of love itself.

Some people have very clear-cut ideas about who God is when they pray. Others do not have a clue; their prayer is a simple expression of their feelings in the hope that someone or something might hear and respond. It really does not matter. Our understandings of prayer are probably just as inaccurate as our understandings of love or God. It is all right.

Gerald G. May, M.D., is Senior Fellow in Contemplative Theology and Psychology at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, D.C. Jerry will be a keynote speaker at Fellowship in Prayer's second "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference June 14-16, 2002, in Princeton. All of this issue's "Illuminations" are taken from Jerry's book The Awakened Heart, *published by HarperCollins Publishers. Look for a full feature from this book in the October, 2001 issue.*

I think most people have trouble with prayer because prayer is really an act of love, and therefore demands vulnerability. As with love, the more we try to control prayer, the less prayer can happen. Yet the desire to defend and protect oneself is understandable. Prayer is where we most directly face the truth of ourselves and of the world: it is risky business indeed. When I feel the fear associated with this vulnerability, I find it reassuring to remember the word *prayer* comes from the Latin root *precarius*, meaning to depend upon grace. From this root also comes our English word *precarious*.

There is nothing inherent in any spiritual practice that guarantees it will be used for good and not for ill. Spiritual things can be used for very unloving purposes. I have been struck with how frequently we use religion to be mean to each other.

Popular religion promises peace of mind if only we will believe correctly. If we are not completely happy, it maintains, it is because we are somehow not right with God. Perhaps we are too sinful, or our faith is insufficient, or we have missed the one true doctrine. Countless people believe the religious myth, even when a cursory reading of the lives of the saints reveals great agony, doubt, struggle within themselves and with their world. A slightly deeper probing of spiritual growth shows that as people deepen in their love for God and others, they become ever more open: not only more appreciative of the beauty and joys of life, but also more vulnerable to its pain and brokenness.

Sailing Home

Esther Quinlan

In 1970, I took a ferry across the lake in Zurich, Switzerland to a pleasant hotel where I met a saint, a Sufi master. Despite his frail health, he had come from Persia to meet with some Americans, rather than have us go to his country, which was having a cholera outbreak. I was twenty-one and searching for God. It was late August, and the air felt more like fall than summer. As I sat on the open deck watching the intermittent sunlight dance on the water, I had no idea that my life was about to take a radical turn—more "radical" than any of my radical university activities had been.

The impact of the turn that I had taken by becoming a Muslim came some months after I had returned to the states when I undertook the practice of the ritual worship known as *salat*. I found myself holding a photocopied prayer manual illustrated with little stick drawings showing the various positions to be assumed as one recited each part of the ritual prayer. After having followed a set of detailed instructions about how to perform the ablutions required before one could pray, I wrapped a large, semi-

Esther Quinlan is an American Muslim convert who has followed the Sufi path for more than twenty-five years. She lives in Boulder, CO with her husband.

circular piece of fabric around myself so that I was covered from head to toe. I turned to face Mecca, feeling fairly absurd, and less than devout.

An additional complication was that the prayers had to be said in Arabic. The sounds themselves, I had been told, had an effect on one's soul. Since I could not read Arabic script at that time, I had to look back and forth from the Arabic transliteration to the English in order to pronounce the words. This process contributed to the general awkwardness. However, in comparison with the other issues, the language was a minor obstacle.

During repeated attempts, I fiddled with various ways to keep the sheet from falling off. It was impossible: I either stepped on it or it slipped gradually off my hair. Tying the cloth tightly around my neck didn't work either because it made me feel claustrophobic. At one point I became so frustrated that I took it—and all of my clothes except my underwear—off and stood there on the prayer rug, fuming: "This is supposed to be a spiritual practice? Why this stupid costume?"

Add to this picture the fact that the ritual prayer has to be performed at specific times. Because I thought that sincerity should be spontaneous, I struggled with the idea that prayer could be done at fixed times and still be sincere. After all these years it is difficult to reconstruct exactly how the fixed times changed from being an imposition to a welcome refuge that I look forward to, a refuge that prompts sincerity. Somehow, I came to understand that it is necessary to be reoriented several times a day because we are lost in a dream of worldly distraction. By tying the times of prayer to the rotation of the earth and its journey around the sun, we can break the spell of this dream. If the setting of the times for *salat*

were left to me, I would try to work it in when it was convenient, putting my worldly preoccupations first.

When I discovered that the first of these fixed times is after dawn and before sunrise, I naively expected my hunger for God would enable me to pop out of bed and feel spiritual at 4 or 5 in the morning. Another American convert, a mathematics professor, was so determined to get up for the morning *salat* that he set three alarm clocks. The first one, next to his bed would go off at 5 o'clock and he would turn it off and turn over in bed. The second clock, placed at his bedroom door, was set for ten minutes later; when it rang he would get up, turn it off and jump back into bed until the third clock, placed out in the hall, would go off at 5:20. By that time he was no longer able to get back to sleep and would take the few steps to the bathroom to begin the ablutions. Being a different type from the math professor, I tried other methods: yanking the clock's plug out of the socket, getting up and going through the motions, eyes closed, while trying not to wake up too much, or just forgetting to set the alarm. However, this admonition of Mevlâna Rumi's helped me to keep trying:

> Forget your life. Say
> God is Great.
> Get up!
> You think you know what time it is . . .
> It's time to pray.
> You've created so many little idols,
> Too many.
> Don't knock on any random door,
> Like a beggar. Reach your long hand out
> To another door, beyond
> Where you go on the street.[1]

Clearly, what I had signed up for was a challenge. I was fond of my little idols; I didn't like getting up before sunrise to reach my long hand out to another door. Entering sacred time is not easy, even though I longed to do so.

Once I got the Arabic down well enough to dispense with the instruction manual things improved a bit. However, I was still left with the head-covering problem. From various readings, I gathered that the point of covering one's head is separation from the distractions of the world; exactly what style of covering one uses is not important. Once I adopted a simple headscarf, a long rectangle one that hung down on either side of my face, I experienced the peace of the private space it created. Before long, the mere touch of it on my hair and cheeks would bring a sweet, enfolding, calming feeling. I was beginning to find my way in to the alchemy of the ritual prayer brought to human beings through the Prophet Muhammad.

Another aspect of *salat* also began to touch me deeply. It has to do with orientation, the turning to God represented by praying faced in the direction of Mecca, the home of the *Ka'bah*. The word means "cube" in Arabic, and the structure marks the spot where Abraham (father of all three monotheistic faiths) built the first house for worship of The One God. Like most people, I had seen photographs of the black-draped cube with thousands of Muslims at prayer surrounding it. The scene looked exotic, weird actually. I wanted to know, "What's in there?" When I learned that the *Ka'bah* is empty, something inside me snapped open with relief. No "thing" was being worshiped. The simple act of facing towards that spot, that direction, reorients us away from fragmentation and

toward unity. As one Sufi master said,

> Wherever everyone gathers in unity
> —that is the *Ka'bah*.
> Any place that Satan cannot approach
> —that is the *Ka'bah*.
> The place where you find your unity with Allah
> —that is the *Ka'bah*.
> The place where our prayer unites with Allah
> —that is the *Ka'bah*.[2]

Physically turning to face Mecca provides an opportunity to bring this beautiful, esoteric meaning of the *Ka'bah* into our awareness. Another aspect of *salat* that is simultaneously particular and universal is the prostration.

No matter what our form of faith, we all understand what getting down on our knees means: you acknowledge

Esther Quinlan

your neediness, your incompleteness. Those feelings that we all have when on our knees are deepened by the prostration. When you put your whole individual self—represented by your face—right down to the ground it is a kind of obliteration, a rest, and a release. In the position of prostration, Muslims say, *Glory be to my Lord Most High and praise be to Him.* The prostration is abandonment of ego. The meaning of the words impacted me in a total way because the position of my body echoed and reinforced them. What we think of as our "highest" part, we willingly place at the lowest level before our Creator because He is the Most High. The first time the reality of the prostration hit me, it felt like I had at last laid down the heavy load that I had been carrying for ages. The physicality of the ritual prayer, like yoga postures, helps bypass the mind. When simply saying words of prayer, it's easy to slip into rote mode. Of course, one can also perform the *salat* by rote, too. I do it often. Still, at some points in the daily prayers, I come to—because of a bodily position or gesture—as though the body has a secret way to circumvent the parrot-like mind.

The *salat* did not reveal its beauty and power all at once, but I persevered. Despite the imperfections of my execution of the act, despite my negative attitude and lack of discipline, somehow just the intention to obey has an effect. If we set sail from New York, a tack of only five degrees can make the difference between landing in England or Africa. So it is with the *salat*: the smallest effort acts as a tack, and gradually, over a long period of time, the effort brings one to the intended destination. I had set sail because of the perfume of Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, and undertook the practice of Islam only because it was required of me. Without that perfume,

I doubt I would ever have looked at Islam at all. Without Islam, it is likely I would have crashed on the rocks. Like many Americans of my generation, I imagined that religious form and ritual was only a barrier, a relic of the Middle Ages that we modern people were too sophisticated to bother with. In our dread of lifeless and meaningless form, we sometimes throw out sacred form and then wonder why we are adrift. Our yearning for ecstatic union with the Divine—essential as it is—cannot, by itself, bring us there.

If we are sincere about searching for God, yearning for the Divine, we must have a vehicle and make an effort to remember God. Although *salat* is not the single most important part of Sufi practice, it is a basic discipline for purification and developing steadiness. The practice of *salat* certainly was an effort for me in the beginning, but, little by little, it has become precious: a boat for the journey Home.

[1] *Coleman Barks and Michael Green,* The Illuminated Prayer *(New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 57.*

[2] *Barks and Green, 78.*

No Sense of Peace

Dennis Slattery

For three months, I retreated to eleven monasteries in six states in the Western United States. On my first sabbatical in twenty-three years of teaching, I decided to do something memorable by spending the bulk of it leading a life of solitude and silence, recollection and contemplation. Yet, even in monastery life, silence was hard to come by.

At one monastery, groups of people, all friends or relatives, rented out a retreat house, descended on it together for a weekend, ordered out for pizzas, played cards most of the night beginning at sunset, toured the area during the day, and left Monday morning. Solitude may be the only thing they did not experience during their getaway.

A life without periodic solitude, one writer has observed, can breed a madness that is not even individually or culturally recognized.

Solitude can be a scary destination; it will assuredly

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take one off the busy, noisy everyday plane and pull one down into the self. No telling what critters one has kept swimming deep in the psyche. The latest horror films with special effects are cherry cheesecake compared to what one might find in solitude and silence. Monks have told me that solitude and the deep silence of the desert drives some people away after their first night. They claim the desert is "too dark, too still, too silent." Even those who flee saying, "I can't stay here. Nothing is going on," leave with the first lesson of solitude in the desert: It offers nothing and is indifferent to anyone's presence.

To enter silence willingly and to stay with it will bring about, I discovered, a psychic and cultural detoxification. Without electronics, gadgets and diversions, one slowly moves to the center of who one is—often an unnerving proposition. Yet another and deeper relationship with one's self is born. Peacefulness has the opportunity, in the stillness and slow time of contemplation, to descend.

Solitude, sustained for days, separates priorities. The importance of the ceramics class or visit to a museum, or the reading that one constantly postpones begins to be seen in new perspective. One can better value one's family, friendships, one's creative work, and prayer as a part of sacred everyday activities. Out of sustained solitude and silence grows a deep feeling of gratitude. Deep silence allows a sense of the ontological—what gives one's being meaning and what sustains existence—to surface.

In several of the places I stayed, a battle was raging between the desire for space that enhanced silence and solitude, and frenzied developers who were intent on building new ski lifts or mountain condos. Renewal and recreation have been usurped by growth and development which seem to serve some egregious myth of progress.

Silence seems to some to be useless. Something gets plowed up, turned over, recycled, renewed, and even refreshed in silence. The phrase "getting away from it all," is not the same as seeking solitude; in fact, it is its antithesis. Embracing life at a much saner, slower pace is what solitude requires. One of the finest, most poetic writers on silence, the Swiss physicist, Max Picard, believes that "in silence I confront the original beginning of things." In the silence is the origin of creation, the first ground of everything that exists. While the act of creating may be somewhat clamorous, its originating impulse is silence itself, and it will be back into this deep silence that all will return.

Robert F. Campbell

The priests, nuns, and brothers I met who live monastic lives, are not serious, brooding, hunkered souls who talk to no one and remain reclusive. In fact, the opposite is true; they are more attached to the world, more grounded and joyful in their solitude than one plugged into all the noise of news or info-talk—all of which create a *papier mache* understanding of the world.

Solitude takes one into the heart of the world, not away from it. In this sense, solitude is paradoxical because of the connection to the world it promotes. Think, for example, of how a relationship can take on sharper outlines by putting some temporary distance between you and that person. A fresh way of seeing may grow out of some space put between you. So it is with solitude. In *Walden*, Henry Thoreau observed of his own stay on the lake that "sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled."

In monasteries, bells not voices, break into the ongoing and deepening silence. The bells divide silence from sound as they call retreatants and monks to prayer. The sounds of bells impose a regular order on each day by calling one's attention to prayer and service and back into the silence from which their sounds emerge.

Solitary, long walks along the northern California coast or deep in the old-growth forests in Oregon, or across the wide-reaching plains of Utah, or up high in the Sangre de Christo Mountains, or through the Rio Grande National forest in Colorado, or in the Cibilo Mountains northeast of Albuquerque—all of these were revelatory places of solitude. Walking along in nature, one feels how penetrating the natural order can be. At night the darkness and silence are so palpable that one can feel them against one's skin.

The natural world takes on a supernatural aura in silence and solitude, and the interior landscape of spirit begins to shift. There is a reciprocity between these two geographies—one inner and one outer—that becomes palpable.

Entering the desert is a courageous act. No one can look back at the way life was or how the social fabric feels with the same eyes or the same heart after entering solitude. Any deep experience of solitude shifts the seeing.

Solitude also simplifies one's life. How little one needs to get by: a small room, a desk, a bed, a chair, a lounge chair, a clothes rack, simple meals taken together. In solitude, one is freed of encumbrances. In fact, solitude insists that many of the supports of ordinary days be relinquished. Then what? There is the question. Evenings are spent with no TV, news, newspapers, magazines, Internet or email. In solitude one is thrown back to oneself. Reading, writing, meditating, walking filled my time. My senses woke up and I began to pay attention to what was around me.

I found myself writing poetry and writing about what I saw in nature. I paid closer attention to the details and textures that defined my world. I wrote of the deer that grazed outside my window at the same time each evening and the chipmunk that lived in the cord of cut wood who darted up to look at me when I sat in the window of my hermitage. His black eyes actually seemed to show some recognition of me after a few days.

I read scripture and listened deeply to the story, to the truth embedded in simple images. I allowed silence, solitude, and darkness to enter me at day's end. After a few days I began to feel the silent rhythm of the days being born, gathering light and heat, and then waning into the silent setting of the luminous dusk as the

coolness of the desert spread silently over the living plants and trees, and deer and coyotes and lizards and insects and birds and me.

I stayed in close contact with my family. I did some professional work with my students' writings. As I hiked, I also found myself praying specifically for family, for friends who are suffering and struggling with poverty, illness or loneliness. I prayed big prayers, too, for humanity and the world.

After three months my sabbatical concluded. I had to ask: How do I take this deep solitude back with me? Back at home I began to try to be quiet, be still, and listen for a half an hour each day. I made a mini-retreat space with a small altar that carries the memory of the altars of the monasteries I visited. Silence seems to gather there in my study. I have a special bookshelf with a few of my favorite books on silence, prayer, and contemplation. I keep a journal just for spiritual writing and meditating. I try to give myself short solitude breaks during the day, a fifteen minute pause in the hectic flow of paper, phones, and faxes. These breaks help me remember why I am here and what I am supposed to accomplish in serving others. I have learned that monasteries in the desert are places to retreat to in order to learn the ways in which silence and solitude can be present and active in every day of my life. Once in awhile we need to retreat in order to remember the truth of this engagement.

Airy Bones

Esther Quinlan

At nine o'clock I go to bed
happy in middle age
wearing my socks
having walked the dog,
flossed my teeth,
and put out the trash.

Somehow this body, stretched and sewn–
corruptible, dense, limiting
always threatening to tie me down
like the heavy white thighs of Mother,
the first form of flesh felt
in this life—

this body breathes more easily now,
floats,
just when by the logic of gravity and time
it should be heavier
because like the thinning of its bones
the space between its atoms grows daily
from the repetition
of His name.

Esther Quinlan is an American Muslim convert who has followed the Sufi path for more than twenty-five years. She lives in Boulder, CO with her husband.

My Father Praying

Andrew Dohan

Being a young boy,
was all the world's joy
of living,
as early sunlight shafted down,
'twixt the tenement brick walls,
slanting a golden beam
across the wrinkled white sole
of my father's right bare foot
while he knelt beside in red long johns,
reciting his morning prayers,
in a midnight whisper,
for all the angels and saints to hear.

Andrew Dohan's poetry has appeared in Twilight Ending. *He lives in Connecticut.*

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED

American Muslims: The New Generation *by Asma Gull Hasan. Published by Continuum, 2001, 200 pages hardcover.*

Asma Gull Hasan retells a story of how the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Wellesley College teaches the value of religious diversity. Dean Victor Kazanjian arranges some chairs in a circle and places a large box in the middle. Participants are asked to describe the entire box. No one is allowed to get up and peek at the portions hidden from view. Soon the group realizes the whole cannot be seen through one pair of eyes. Only by listening to what others see from their specific vantage points can each member of the group begin to envision the whole.

In *American Muslims: The New Generation,* Asma Hasan becomes an enthusiastic tour guide to share the world as she sees it as an American-born Muslim woman from a family who earlier immigrated from Pakistan.

Asma is what she deems a "mainstream Muslim," that is one of the estimated four to six million Americans who gather at the 2,000 mosques sprinkled across the country and whose spiritual practice centers on the five pillars of Islam: confession of faith or *Shahadah,* daily prayers or *salat,* charitable giving and actions, fasting during Ramadan—Islam's holy month when Muhammad received his initial revelation—and pilgrimage, travelling to Mecca, if one is economically able during one's lifetime. A Sunni Moslem, Asma is counted among the ninety percent of the 1.2 billion Moslems worldwide. (The second largest group, the Shi'ite Moslems, mostly located geographically in Iran and Iraq, add the sayings of

Muhammad's son, Ali, to the Qur'anic teachings all Muslims follow.) Asma claims very few points of friction exist between her American identity and Muslim practice and tradition but these few conflicts, mostly centered around gender issues, rankle deeply.

Her own reading of the Qu'ran affirms the equality of women and men, yet she recounts a family debate about whether men and women should be allowed to pray in the same room. Asma reasoned that if men and women will stand before Allah on judgement day, they should be able to pray together now. Her grandfather retorted,"No, men are superior in Islam." When Asma challenged her grandfather to support his views from the *Qu'ran*, he wouldn't, but his comment still stung. She writes, "This is my *jihad* (holy struggle) with my grandfather." This cultural clash summarizes many of the moments when ethnic tradition and belief clash with American cultural values and social expectations.

American Muslims is a helpful book for the way it describes the uneasy task of claiming one's religious identity while young and living in a pluralistic society. Seeing the world through Asma's eyes adds to an understanding of the whole multi-dimensioned "box" of faith.

~Rebecca Laird

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